

**ACHIEVING
GOOD
COMMUNITY
RELATIONS**



***A Public
Involvement
Guidebook***



**Environment
Ontario**

Jim Bradley, Minister



WHY COMMUNITY RELATIONS?

In the past, government agencies and other large organizations often placed other priorities ahead of maintaining good community relations. This often led to misunderstanding and suspicion. The public didn't know what government was doing, often claiming that nothing was being done. Public servants were suspicious of the public's motives and felt threatened by the public's demands for more involvement and information.

Requirements and needs have changed. While Ontario's Ministry of the Environment requires public involvement (such as public meetings for control orders) under the *Environmental Protection Act*, it also has made involving the public in the planning process a priority. The ministry's policy is to respond positively to the public's demands for more involvement in the decision-making process and for more information about what we are doing.

As a result, good community relations has become essential to the effective implementation of Ontario's environmental protection and regulatory programs.



WHAT IS A COMMUNITY RELATIONS PROGRAM?

A community relations program includes those actions designed to improve two-way communication between the ministry and the public. It's not a one-way, promotional program, but is directed at searching out and responding to community issues before they become problems.

Every time you deal with the public, from answering your telephone to participating in a public meeting, you are affecting the relationship you have with your community.



A GOOD COMMUNITY RELATIONS PROGRAM:

- will help you to know what your community thinks about various issues, often before these issues become high-profile problems
- will provide you with an opportunity to advise the community about what you are doing
- will encourage your community to contribute ideas for solving environmental problems
- will build trust and cooperation as people feel confident that they are being heard
- will make your job easier and more enjoyable, and, most importantly, effective

A community relations program will not eliminate conflict or achieve consensus on all issues, but it will provide a climate that allows for increased understanding and cooperation so that acceptable solutions can be found.

Good community relations will always result in a better working relationship with the community.



ACHIEVING GOOD COMMUNITY RELATIONS

- Assess your current relationship with the community. Do you have an effective community relations program? Ask people for their opinions and advice.
- Get to know your community. Keep an up-to-date list of contacts. Research community positions on important issues.
- Listen to what people in your community are saying. Act upon what you hear. Follow up; let people know what action you have taken.
- Keep information flowing; keep lines of communication open. Do not wait for your community to communicate with you; if you communicate first, it will be appreciated and provide the basis for good community relations.
- Thank-you letters and regular telephone calls are powerful tools in assuring people that you care about what they have done and think. If someone writes you, respond in writing.
- Be available. Encourage people to contact you.
- Maintain open relations with the media. The Communications Branch, through the Human Resources Branch, provides training in media relations.
- Contact your Project Co-ordinator in the Communications Branch who will be happy to assist you in developing a community relations program.

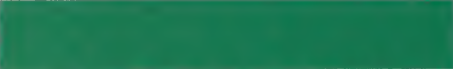


SOME IDEAS FOR YOUR PROGRAM

What will work best for you and your community depends upon the issue, your resources and the needs of the community.

A community relations program can include:

- regular reports to the community on complaints received, explaining how they were handled
- a hot line or toll-free telephone number
- regularly scheduled open houses
- a newsletter that includes contributions from people in the community
- working directly with your community through a public advisory or liaison committee
- meetings with local groups to talk about what is going on and to allow them to identify community priorities
- information sharing or phone-in shows on local radio or cable stations
- workshops on specific problems or topics
- field trips



CASE STUDIES:

- The Spills Action Centre (SAC) began operations on the same day that Part XI of the *Environmental Protection Act* (the Spills Bill) came into force. SAC is a 24-hour hot-line for reporting spills and other urgent environmental concerns, handling over 13,000 incidents a year. Provincial and international users, including the general public, have expressed strong support for the access to the ministry that SAC provides. As well, SAC provides the ministry with an improved, more efficient and systematic approach for dealing with urgent environmental matters, especially during off hours.

Toll-free numbers are used in the Remedial Action Plan (RAP) program. For example, the four northern Lake Superior RAP teams have one number for all of the RAPs. This toll-free number puts the public and the RAP teams in direct contact.

- Environment Ontario has involved the public in its continuing clean-up operations at the Deloro Arsenic Treatment Plant in the village of Deloro, Hastings County. Since 1983, the ministry has scheduled annual open houses to explain to the public the ongoing arsenic removal process from the groundwater that was contaminating the Moira River. At these events, ministry field staff present a slide show detailing the history of silver mining and refining operations in Deloro, the resulting pollution problem, and the ministry's clean-up efforts in the area. Residents are urged to contribute to the open houses by bringing their old photographs of the former smelting plant. The plant's history, of course, is bound up with that of the village.

The growing number of people who attend these open houses is indicative of the support the ministry is receiving. Southeast regional staff believe that the open houses provide a practical way of involving the public in its work, and are pleased with the positive reaction of Deloro area residents to their initiatives.



CASE STUDIES:

- At a Bay of Quinte Remedial Action Plan (RAP) public meeting, a concern was expressed that the community was not actively involved in the development of the RAP. The RAP Team Co-ordinator took draft terms of reference for a public advisory committee to the next public meeting; people expressed their pleasure with the idea. The Bay of Quinte RAP public advisory committee, facilitated by a local citizen, represents a wide range of local interests. Support for and interest in the RAP has increased. All those involved have indicated that the committee is a positive means for obtaining community involvement in the development of the RAP.

From Thunder Bay to Cornwall, public advisory committees working closely with RAP teams are an important component of the RAP public involvement program.

For more information and assistance with community relations program planning, contact your Communications Branch Project Co-ordinator.

